

## Life Studies: American Poetry from T. S. Eliot to Allen Ginsberg

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The dominant figure in modern poetry from the 1920's through the middle of the century, in part because of his stature as a critic and publisher, was the poet T. S. Eliot. In his landmark essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," (1919) Eliot defined poetry as an escape from emotion and personality--a definition that subsequent American poets have alternately embraced, argued with, and denounced in such a vigorous fashion that it may be useful to consider it as a linchpin of modernism. True poetry, according to the poet and critic John Crowe Ransom, "only wants to see the world, to see it better." Poetry, he believed, is a superior form of knowledge which gives us the fullness of human experience, not just the facts and abstractions that suffice for knowledge in a scientific age. Ransom was the leading light of the Fugitives, a group of Southern Agrarian poets and critics formed at Vanderbilt University in the 1920's, who were distinctly at odds with northern industrialization and its glorification of science and progress. In a statement parallel to Eliot's famous declaration that he was "an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics," Ransom proposed "a program going something like this: In manners, aristocratic; in religion, ritualistic; in art, traditional." Ransom's own poems are marked by ceremony, both in style and subject--a slim body of perfect lyrics which led his admirers to wish he had written more.

But it was as editor of *The Kenyon Review* that Ransom had the most decisive impact on American letters. In his essays and editorial decisions he mapped a conservative course across the literary landscape; and in *The New Criticism* (1941), he identified a style of criticism, founded on close reading of the text--separate from any consideration of the social, political, or biographical context of its creation--which held sway in academic quarters for an entire generation. When in subsequent years many poets rebelled against the prevailing aesthetic establishment, Ransom was the figure often held responsible for the academic institutionalization of the New Criticism.

Another key poet/critic of the New Criticism was Allen Tate, who called poetry "the art of apprehending and concentrating our experience in the mysterious limitations of form." Like the other Fugitives, his experience was rooted in the South, though he spent much of his adult life north of the Mason-Dixon line; and while he wrote fiction, essays, and biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, he is best known for a poetic

masterpiece, "Ode to the Confederate Dead," which later prompted his most renowned pupil, Robert Lowell, to respond with a masterpiece of his own, entitled "For the Union Dead."

Robert Penn Warren, the youngest Fugitive, was the most prolific member of the group, publishing in his long and distinguished career more than forty books of poetry, fiction, criticism, and biography. A Pulitzer-Prize winner for both poetry and fiction, he brought to his poems the novelist's storytelling gifts and expansive ambition, while his novels profited from the poet's sense of language.

Among younger poets, no doubt the Fugitives' most famous legacy was Robert Lowell, considered by many to be the most important American poet of the second half of the century. As a young poet, he actually pitched a tent on Allen Tate's front lawn at Kenyon College, and was converted from a fashionable free-verse poet into a phenomenal technician of rigorously metered and rhymed poems in traditional verse forms who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his second collection, *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). This was one of his many literary changes, the most influential of which was his decision, in *Life Studies* (1959), to expose his private life in his poems. If Lowell did not, strictly speaking, inaugurate what came to be called the "confessional" school of poetry (which included such other notable poets as John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass, discussed later in this essay), he was nevertheless one of its more determined exponents. His family history, his bouts of madness, his alcoholism, his marital problems, even letters from an ex-wife--all were grist for his tumultuous poetic mill. For thirty years, Lowell's work defined the center of modern poetry (much as Eliot's had in the previous generation), until his untimely death from a heart attack at age 59 in 1977.

His close friend, Elizabeth Bishop, was as reticent about her private life as Lowell was forthcoming. A protégée of Marianne Moore, her poetic power derived from a similar scrupulous regard for language, a strict attention to the things of the earth, and a determination not to repeat herself. Though she published only 101 poems in a career spanning a half century, she is viewed as one of our most abundant poets, since each of her poems seems not only inevitable in the writing but also necessary in the reading. Her formal range was extraordinary: she wrote sestinas, blank verse meditations, double sonnets, prose poems, songs, and exquisite lyrics. Her most autobiographical excursion occurs in a short story, "In the Village," an oblique narrative about her childhood, which was not a happy one: soon after her father died, her mother was committed to a mental asylum, and she was raised by her grandparents. Accordingly, Bishop became a poet who would learn, as she wrote in "One Art," that "the art of losing's not too hard to master/ Though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster." Suffice it to say that she redeemed those losses in her poems.

Another friend of Lowell, Randall Jarrell, had losses of a different sort, and his principal poetic means of redeeming them--a series of dramatic monologues--restored to contemporary literary practice the usefulness of

the dramatic "mask." From the well-anthologized "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" to "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," Jarrell gave voice to his darkest imaginings, speaking from the viewpoints of war victims, old women, and children. He was also the most admired (and feared) poetry critic of his generation, whose reviews and essays continue to be read as definitive judgments on the state of the art at mid-century. Jarrell's apparently accidental death in 1965, which may have been a suicide, brought an abrupt end to his exploration of the "unknown unwanted life," which in his poems had begun to shine.

Also known for his psychological delving was the poet [Theodore Roethke](#), who wrote, "We all know that poetry is shot through with appeals to the unconscious, to the fears and desires that go far back to our childhood, into the imagination of the race," and this was certainly true of his own work, which was rooted in his discovery of his own childhood as a subject. In *The Lost Son and Other Poems* he recreated the lost world of his father's beloved greenhouse in Michigan. His work was possessed of a romantic sensibility and vibrant, deeply lyrical language that in the same poem often veered from the rhetoric of high literature--"At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry"--to the idiom of nursery rhymes:

The shape of a rat?  
It's bigger than that.  
It's less than a leg  
And more than a nose,  
Just under the water  
It usually goes.

While Roethke used imagery from the natural world to plumb the unconscious, in *The Dream Songs* poet [John Berryman](#) explored the depths of a divided self through the rants, laments, and tragi-comic asides of an outrageous alter ego named "Henry." *The Dream Songs*, a sequence composed over more than a dozen years and numbering close to four hundred, mix vaudeville antics with dazzling technical leaps of language to inimitable effect, as in the opening stanza of #29:

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart  
so heavy, if he had a hundred years  
& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time  
Henry could not make good.  
Starts again always in Henry's ears  
the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

What "starts again" is the memory of an irreversible loss, which in the end led Berryman, one of the most erudite and original poets of his generation, down a path of self-destruction that exceeded even his friend Robert Lowell's. John Berryman committed suicide in 1972 by jumping from a bridge in Minneapolis.

Indeed, suicidal despair appears to have been an occupational hazard of poets in the "confessional" generation. When [Sylvia Plath](#) killed herself in London in 1963, she left behind a group of harrowing last poems that transformed her from a little-known young poet into an icon for the

burgeoning feminist movement. Plath depicted herself as a "Lady Lazarus" who "eats men like air." "Daddy," one of her most controversial poems, addresses a brutal father-figure in the frankest possible terms:

"Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You--// Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through." Plath asserts that "Every woman adores a Fascist," quickening discussion of the ethical propriety of appropriating such politically charged terms to heighten the dramatic intensity of her poems.

[Anne Sexton](#), too, died by her own hand, in 1974, in the middle of a poetic odyssey which was by turns confessional, magical, and mythical. "I have gone out, a possessed witch,/ haunting the black air, braver at night," she wrote, mixing autobiography and folklore; "dreaming evil, I have done my hitch/ over the plain houses, light by light." In her updated versions of the Grimms' fairy tales--"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Rapunzel," "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)"--she found marvelous ways to meditate on what it means to be a woman. And in her late recastings of Christian myths she attempted to create new psalms for a rapidly changing society--"For God was as large as a sunlamp and laughed his heat at us and therefore we did not cringe at the death hole."

Like Plath and Sexton, [W. D. Snodgrass](#) was a poet of a generation younger than Lowell and Berryman, but he was the very first to bear the tag "confessional." His first book, *Heart's Needle*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1960, contained poems that had already had a decisive influence on the poems of Lowell and others. Writing in traditional forms about untraditional subjects--divorce, marital betrayal, the breakup of a family--Snodgrass discovered a rich new vein of poetic material, untapped by poets for whom the Eliotic doctrine of "impersonality" precluded the sort of self-exposure that according to some amounted to unseemly exhibitionism.

[Allen Ginsberg](#), of course, was another poet of the generation that followed Lowell who made poetry a vehicle for unprecedented autobiographical candor. In 1955, when he read his long poem "Howl" at a San Francisco art gallery, the Beat Movement was born--a howl of protest against the conformism and conservatism of the so-called "Silent Generation" of the fifties. Ginsberg and the other Beat poets mounted a frontal assault on the social and political institutions of the age, presaging the upheavals that swept all of American society in the 1960's. Following the great English Romantic poet [William Blake](#), and adopting [Walt Whitman](#) as his poetic mentor, Ginsberg resurrected the father of American poetry in a wild new incarnation: the bearded bohemian bard, spreading a gospel of Eastern philosophy, spiritual enlightenment, sexual freedom, and ferocious opposition to the status quo of American society. The opening lines of "Howl" are as famous as any written in the second half of the century, and amount to a complete repudiation of Eliot's "escape from emotion":

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,

dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an  
angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the  
starry dynamo  
in the machinery of night.

Snodgrass, Ginsberg, Plath, and Sexton were at the heart of a generation of American poets who were born mostly in the 1920's, raised during the Great Depression and World War II, and started publishing after the war, when Eliot's influence was at its height: a generation that includes other such celebrated poets as Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder, Amiri Baraka, and many more. It is a generation equally remarkable for the sheer number of its brilliantly talented voices and for the restless diversity of their sensibilities and points of view. Raised during the heyday of the "modernist revolution," they were the first post-war, "post-modern" generation, forging their careers in a technological culture more and more given over to electronic media: to television instead of newspapers, to movies instead of books. Many of these poets are still writing today, and are considered the master poets of our own time. But the shift from the doctrine of "impersonality" that defined the poetic orthodoxy of modernism under Eliot and Ransom to the "naked poetry" of the Beats and confessional poets (which became the new orthodoxy of the sixties) reflected a profound shift in modern culture. Whether it began with the influence of Freudian psychology, first registered in the 1930's work of W. H. Auden, or the revival of literary Romanticism (which Eliot disliked) in the work of poets like Roethke and Dylan Thomas in the 1940's, or the Beats' rebellion against ideological and social conformism in the 1950's, the assertion of an unprecedented *personal* aesthetic eventually overturned Eliot's predominant authority. The result since the sixties has been a constantly shifting dialectic, often passionately contentious, between different but equally modern impulses: between the impulse on the one hand to conserve literary and cultural traditions ("Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" wrote Eliot), and the impulse on the other to break with the past and seek new forms, new influences, other traditions. Both arise from the perception of a constantly and rapidly changing world, from anxieties and hopes for what will be lost or found around the next corner, a perception that catalyzed art at the beginning of the century. What has changed for poetry in our own time is that the belief in a new poetic orthodoxy, embodied in the ghost of T. S. Eliot, has unraveled into the extraordinary polyphony and aggregate genius of our contemporary American poetry.

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